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ABSTRACT

A discussion of role-playing as a teaching technique in pre-service language teacher education suggests procedures for acquainting teacher trainees with role-playing and preparing them to write their own role-plays. The method aims to overcome trainee resistance to group work. Exposure to role-playing takes three forms: (1) trainees view a film about group work in the classroom and discuss it in a specified format, similar to a debate; (2) trainees participate in microteaching, using role-cards to define the "learners'" roles; and (3) trainees engage in traditional role-playing, not necessarily related to teaching. It is suggested that this method allows trainees to see the potential for learning in role-playing and to focus on the value of language in the exercise. Sample follow-up activities are recommended. Specific ways to use this role-playing experience to encourage trainees to invent their own exercises are outlined. (MSE)

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*Role-Plays in Pre-Service Teacher Training*

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It is the purpose of this article to suggest procedures which will:

1. Acquaint pre-service teacher trainees with role-plays, i.e., a technique in which fluency is practised in the format of group work. This will be done through a series of activities that will require discussing group work in groups, then experiencing role-cards during microteaching and, finally, taking part in role-plays.

2. Prepare trainees to write role-plays of their own.

## Pre-service teacher training

There is a significant difference between pre-service and in-service teacher training. Trainees with no teaching experience usually have only a dim idea of what a real language classroom is like, even though all non-native teachers and most native teachers of English have first-hand experience of learning a foreign language. While the causes of this phenomenon are beyond the scope of this article, three implications seem quite relevant.

1. Trainees tend to have a combination of Grammar-Translation and Audio-Lingual leanings, extracting the most discredited features of both methods. They see the classroom as a place for strictly controlled accuracy oriented work only.

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2. Those trainees who did not experience group work in their English lessons at school, usually do not believe it can work. They feel that they have to be in absolute control of everything that goes on in the classroom.

3. Trainees have problems with transfer; in other words, they are unable to extract the essence of a technique out of a particular exercise or activity and to apply it in other circumstances. Admittedly, this inability is not confined to pre-service trainees, but it is more acute in their cases.

## Group work

As has already been said, resistance to group work is one of the more common problems trainers come across in their work.

It is all right to talk about the advantages of group work, yet it goes without saying that it is much better to let the trainees experience it. As teacher trainers we should be particularly aware of the need to practise what we preach. We teach how to teach, after all.

It is possible to engage trainees in some language activity that requires group work and then discuss the technique. Time can be saved, however, by focusing the activity on the very problem of group work. Here is a procedure that has been found effective.

I. A group of 18 trainees are told they will see the film *Pair and Group Work in a Language Programme* (The British Council, 1980). They are asked to pay particular attention to the advantages and drawbacks of pair and group work in the Polish (or any other monolingual) context. That problem will be discussed after the film.

II. The film is shown.

III. The format of the discussion is explained:

Stage 1: Trainees take one slip of paper each.2) All those with *1* on the slip get together, all those with *2*, etc. Numbers *1*, *2* and *3* stand for being in favour of group work, while numbers *4*, *5* and *6* - for being against. The colour of the slip of paper is irrelevant at this point. Trainees discuss the view they have been allotted. They are to put down as many arguments as they can.

Stage 2: Trainees re-group according to the colour of their slip of paper: all those with white/green/yellow slips get together. In this way three groups of six are formed, half of the trainees in each group being for and half being against group work.

Each group is asked to make a list of all the points relevant to the subject of group work in the order of priority, eg.,

1. Learners are active.
2. They might use their mother tongue.
3. ...

Stage 3 (optional): Groups compare their lists.

IV. Feedback regarding group work is conducted. Trainees are encouraged to share their real views and to say whether the sequence of activities has had any influence on their attitude towards the technique.

V. Trainees are asked to comment on the idea of being allocated views. The trainer might point out that this technique is akin to role-playing (if trainees have come across this type of exercise before).

VI. Two handouts are distributed. The one on group work is based on *Notes for Teacher Trainers* (Rixon 1980) that accompany the film. It focuses on the arguments in favour of group work and on the role of the teacher. The other handout (see *AGREE!* below) shows ways of exploiting the idea of arguing for a point of view one does not necessarily agree with. Trainees experienced this kind of argument after watching the film on group work. This handout should make them aware of how versatile this technique is, ie it should help them cope with the problem of transfer (see point 3 in Pre-service teacher training).

*AGREE!*(3)
(for any number of learners)

1. A controversial motion is put forward (eg 'We should go back to Hammurabi's code of law' or 'Telephones constitute an invasion of privacy').

2. Learners draw lots which will determine whether they are in favour of or against the motion. They think of arguments they can use.

3. A discussion follows.

Notes:

1. There should be roughly the same number of lots marked for and against the proposal.

2. Since views are drawn, learners might find themselves arguing against their personal opinions. This can be a very stimulating factor, which will enhance the discussion.

Alternative procedure:

A panel discussion is organized with 4 or 6 learners taking part in it. Half of them are for the issue in question and half are against. The discussion is followed by a vote, which will indicate whose arguments the audience (ie the rest of the learners) found most convincing. It is up to the teacher to decide which procedure he/she will choose.

## Microteaching

Rather than engage trainees in an activity that requires group work and then ask them to extract the essence of group work, the trainer would be well advised to discuss group work in groups (as suggested above). Rather than discuss simulations they have taken part in and then discuss the technique itself, trainees can take part in Ken Jones's excellent 'We're not going to use simulations' (Jones 1982:100-111). Or, to be more precise, a discussion of simulations can be enhanced by the trainees' having taken part in 'We're not going to use simulations'.

Proceeding along the same lines, it is a good idea to use role-cards in a teacher training class, not because the trainer wants to present the use of role-cards (and thus the advantages of role-playing) but because in the teacher training class they have a purpose in their own right.

Peer-group microteaching is a case of role-playing with 'learners' improvising. Yet if the 'learners'' behaviour is left to the trainees' discretion, many of them might be too co-operative and 'understand' everything too quickly. On the other hand, as Broughton (1979:49-50) points out, 'a number of enthusiasts (...) [take] upon themselves roles of problem learners, deaf mutes or even relatives of an imaginary Minister of Education (...)'. Geddes and Raz (1979:60) mention a similar problem:

> The 'class' (...) might be told: 'Pretend that you are a class of 3rd year learners in a secondary school (...)'. (...) 'Pupils' may not stick to their roles, adopting a new one temporarily for a particular response, or they may overact and make the class dissolve into giggles.4)

Error cards

Geddes and Raz suggest using role-cards as 'this can help to sensitise both "pupils" and "teachers" to aspects of pupil-teacher interaction' (ibid:60).

Examples:

> You are a good student but sometimes you like to act the clown and to make the rest of the class laugh.
>
> You are a very shy pupil. When the teacher asks you a question you usually don't answer because you are afraid of giving incorrect answers. (ibid:60)

Edge (1984) recommends error cards, i.e., cards which contain 'instructions regarding the deliberate making of a particular language error', for practising techniques of correcting mistakes. He also adds that

> when the explicit focus of the trainer is elsewhere, on *questioning*, for example, the cards are also useful. They can be used to make the "trainer"-"learner" interaction more realistic without being focused on. (ibid:121)

An example of an error card:

> 1. You confuse *he* and *she*.
> 2. You cannot self-correct, but you can accept peer-correction.
> 3. Make the same mistake again, but self-correct if given the chance. (ibid:119)

It might be advisable to combine the types of cards recommended by Geddes and Raz (1979) and Edge (1984). That would be especially useful when lack of time does not allow enough microlessons to be focused specifically on one particular issue, eg., error correction techniques. One set of universal cards like that can be used throughout a teacher training course. With the set relatively big, the same role-cards will not turn up too often, even if they are assigned at random.

Examples:

Answer out of turn.

You are well-behaved.

Try to translate everything.

Keep staring out of the window.

You need encouraging.

Co-operate with the teacher.

You cannot pronounce /O/ and / /.

You don't know irregular verbs.

Say nothing unless asked by name.

Feedback

During the feedback session, 'pupils' should be asked whether the 'teacher' reacted to their behaviour during the microlesson.

Thus, microteaching is a case of role-playing. Furthermore it can be enhanced by the use of role-cards. The problem arises whether trainees will make the necessary transfer from the use of role-cards in microteaching to their role in language teaching activities.

First of all it may be useful to make the trainees aware of the fact that the technique of role-playing has been practised on them and that this has been an opportunity to find out whether it works or not. On the whole, having methods or techniques tried out on themselves means that the teachers will later use only the ones they are convinced about, which implies using them with more enthusiasm. That enthusiasm is bound to be detected and then hopefully shared by their learners.

It seems, however, that while role-playing in the context of microteaching is usually appreciated by the trainees as a useful experience, it is relatively rarely that they realize the full potential of the technique.

After the trainees have taken part in and discussed both group work and microteaching with the use of role-cards, they should experience role-plays proper.

Role-plays

Example

*EXPECTATIONS5)*

(for groups of 3-4 learners)

**Mr.Bolton**
Your daughter Susan is expecting a baby. You are delighted. You think that it is never too early to start making important plans. You think that if it is a boy, a proper school (a good knowledge of Latin') is the only basis for a future career as a lawyer, doctor or diplomat. If it is a girl, she has to speak foreign languages, sing and play the piano very well. In this way she will find a good husband. You start the conversation.

**Mrs.Bolton**
Your daughter Susan is expecting a baby. You are delighted. You think that Marcin and Susan are old enough to be left alone to decide on their baby's future. Anyway, it is bad luck to plan the future of an unborn baby. (Do not tell the others about your superstition because they are bound to laugh at you.) Last night you had a dream and you are sure this will be a boy. You think your husband talks too much. Try to change the subjet of the conversation.

**Mr.Krawczyk**
Your daughter-in-law Susan is expecting a baby. You are delighted. You do not believe in schools at all. They ruin natural talents. You think that if your grandchild is left alone, he or she will spontaneously become a great artist. It does not matter if the baby is a boy or a girl.

**Mrs.Krawczyk**
Your daughter-in-law Susan is expecting a baby. You are delighted. You think that Marcin and Susan are far too young and inexperienced to decide about the future of your granddaughter. (You are sure it will be a girl!) You think she should become a second Madame Curie. You have already bought her a 'Young Chemist' set.

Note:

In the case of too few learners available to take part in the role-play, one of the role-cards can be left out (**Mrs.Bolton** or **Mr.Krawczyk**).

Introducing a role-play

In a well-planned activity the need for participants to be prepared to take part in it will always be taken into account. Thus, before being asked to discuss group work, for instance, trainees watched a film on the same subject. Similarly, learners will benefit most from role-plays if they are adequately prepared to take part in them. That is why the teacher may first wish to introduce the general theme of the role-play.

This can be done in several ways. A video, slides, pictures, audio recordings, printed texts on the same or related subject can be used. The purpose of those audio-visual aids will be to initiate a discussion, which will set the scene for the role-play itself and/or make the learners aware of the several aspects most problems have.

Since the teacher has, theoretically at least, a selection of ways to introduce the subject of a role-play, what should he/she be guided by? The answer depends on the resources that are at the teacher's disposal. As circumstances vary from country to country and from school to school, teachers would be advised to use the most appropriate and relevant materials at their disposal. In

some cases this might mean something as basic as a short oral introduction by the teacher. In any case, he/she has to be careful not to spend too much time on this preliminary discussion or introduction, so that the subject is not exhausted before the role-play takes place.

For a teacher of English, the language used in a discussion is perhaps more important than the subject matter. Role-plays are basically an excuse to make learners talk.6) That is why it is necessary to devote some time to the language those activities generate. When they are aimed at the intermediate and advanced learners, there should not be too many problems with pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar.7) Experience has shown, however, that even advanced learners are often not able to vary the way of expressing the same meaning. Therefore some work on functions might be essential.

When the teacher works on his/her future lesson, he/she may plan to elicit or pre-teach the functions that the learners will need during the subsequent activity. This can be done in the same way that one elicits or pre-teaches language during any other lesson.

When the time for the actual role-play comes, the learners should always be given time to read their role-cards and to prepare an outline of what they are going to say.

It is possible - for variety's sake - to have all learners with the same role work together at this stage. After the learners have discussed their parts, they re-group to take part in the role-play proper. This arrangement will encourage the learners to discuss among themselves any

doubts they have without referring straight away to the teacher. In this way they learn to be more independent. They can also exchange their views as to how the role-play will develop or think of arguments they can use (eg in *EXPECTATIONS* those learners who have the part of **Mrs.Bolton** may think of ways to change the subject of the conversation). This stage of the lesson can also be a substitute for the introduction of the problem by the teacher, which was suggested earlier.

Rules

Practice has shown that before learners get truly acquainted with role-plays, they tend to forget certain basic principles. The result is that the activity fails and learners together with their - often inexperienced - teacher lose heart. The same may happen in the case of trainees new to role-plays. That is why it is advisable to let the learners have three rules in front of them at all times.

DON'T SHOW YOUR ROLE-CARD TO ANYBODY

DON'T REVEAL ALL THE INFORMATION AT ONCE

SPEAK ENGLISH!

The most effective way of making the learners remember the three imperatives is to put them on all role-cards. In this way whenever a learner consults his/her card he/she is reminded of the principles. The teacher may decide, however, to prepare rules sheets and distribute them among the class - one per group. The more attractive and conspicuous they are, the more likely they are to be effective.

Follow-up

Role-plays can be followed by two basic kinds of follow-up activities: I.oral and II.written.

I. Oral follow-up: Discussion of what happened during the role-play.

1. Ladousse (1987:16) suggests concentrating on the learners:

a. Who participated?
b. Who did not?
c. Why not?
d. Who was very good?
e. Who could have done better?

2.It is also possible to discuss the way the situation developed during the role-play as well as

3.the language mistakes committed by the learners.

II. Written follow-up: Learners might be asked to write letters reporting the discussion that has taken place (eg in *EXPECTATIONS* **Mrs.Bolton** writes to her sister complaining about her husband).

As Ladousse (1987:16-17) points out, however, 'it is perfectly acceptable to consider that the objective of the role-play (...) has been met as the activity itself was carried out, and to move straight on to a completely different phase of the lesson'. Ladousse suggests that teachers should use their own judgement in deciding when follow-up is useful.

Writing role-cards

The experience of participating in role-plays is bound to trigger off the trainees' own inventiveness. The trainees might start with improving existing role-cards or adapting them to the needs and interests of specific groups of

learners. Gradually, they will become more adventurous and write original role-cards. They should be encouraged to do that as any materials created with a clearly specified audience in mind - one's own learners! - are bound to be better than those produced commercially.

Before trainees set out to prepare their own sets of role-cards, the trainer should make sure that they know enough about the principles which govern this communicative activity. Here is what the trainer can do:

1. Choose a few role-plays that trainees have taken part in and that worked particularly well.

2. Ask the trainees to analyse the individual role-plays and role-cards as they remember them.

- What was the role-play about?
- Who were the participants?
- How were they characterized (if at all)?
- What kind of information were they provided with? Did all the participants know the same things?
- In what way did the role-cards encourage the participants to talk?

3. Discuss the key concepts (information gap, opinion gap and built-in disagreement8)) and the relationship between them. It might be useful to arrive at the following statements:

- Having opinions that differ does not necessarily mean disagreement.
- In order to have a guaranteed disagreement, opinions must differ.
- Having opinions that differ does not necessarily mean possessing different information.

- Knowing different things can result in different opinions.

- Knowing different things does not guarantee different opinions.

- Disagreement does not necessarily mean possessing different information.

- Knowing different things can result in disagreement.

- Knowing different things does not guarantee disagreement.

Other problem areas that the trainees' attention should be drawn to include learner-centred lessons, the importance of fluency oriented work, attitude towards errors, student talking time versus teacher talking time (STT vs TTT).

4. Provide ther trainees with the full set of role-cards of one of the role-plays and let them analyse how the information/opinion gap is exploited.

5. Divide the trainees into groups and ask them to prepare one set of role-cards per group.

6. One by one, the groups give the role-cards to other groups, who take part in the role-plays with no prior preparation. The other trainees watch and listen.

7. The trainees discuss the individual role-plays.

- Was the role-play successful?

- Why/why not?

- How was it constructed?

- Could it be improved?

- How?

Eventually, trainees should realize that real-life communication is usually stimulated by the fact that people either know different things or have different opinions (cf

Morrow 1981:62). If communicative activities resemble real-life communication - which is certainly their aim - can it be assumed that learners will have different opinions on a given subject? If the subject under discussion is sufficiently complicated and controversial, it would be a most peculiar coincidence if everybody had exactly the same views. In other cases, however, it is safer to allot conflicting opinions (cf discussing group work). It is also possible to let the learners have different pieces of information regarding the situation in question.

Trainees will see that the ambitious aim of imitating real-life communication is best achieved by having disagreemnt built into the communicative activities. Learners can talk because some of them know something the others do no know (eg in *JAM* below, **Paula's mother** does not know about **Paula**'s boyfriend) or because they have conflicting views (eg in *EXPECTATIONS* the **Boltons** and the **Krawczyks** have different views about the baby's future). Trainees are also bound to notice that the participants' opinions can be different because they know different things and that in order to make an activity more challenging learners can be given a piece of information with a stipulation that it is not to be disclosed, although it has to be acted upon.

It should be pointed out that simple role-plays based on family situations, like *JAM*, are particularly useful as examples of how easy it is to write one's own role-cards (cf Wallwork 1986:30-31).

*JAM9)*

(for groups of 2-3 learners)

**Paula**
You are 15 and very much in love. It is your boyfriend's birthday next Sunday and you desperately want to spend the day with him. Your mother is old-fashioned and thinks you are too young to go out with boys, so you cannot tell her why you do not want to stay at home on Sunday. She wants you to help her in making strawberry jam. Make your mother change her mind. Tell her, for example, that jam is fattening or that one should not work on Sundays or that fruit will be cheaper in two weeks' time. Your godfather is fond of you. Ask him to help you change your mother's mind.

**Paula's mother**
You want to make strawberry jam next Sunday. You will need Paula's help. You told her so two weeks ago. Now she is telling you she cannot (will not?) help you. You do not understand why not. You are suspicious. You never change your mind. Ask Paula's godfather for support.

**Paula's godfather**
Paula and her mother are arguing. They want you to take sides. You do not care what will happen next Sunday. You are in poor health and that is all you are interested in. You keep describing your symptoms. (Decide what they are.)

Notes:

1. The sex of the participants of the role-play is irrelevant. The teacher will only need to make minor changes in the role-cards: **Paul** might want to meet his girlfriend or **Paula** might appeal to her godmother for help or **Paul's father** might want **Paul** to help him.

2. The role of **Paula's godfather** is optional.

Conclusion

If the trainer chooses examples of role-plays carefully, it will be easy for trainees to see the points he/she is making. Should it be otherwise, it can be useful to hold a panel discussion of the type described on page 4 (*AGREE!* Alternative procedure).

Making trainees aware of the importance of role-plays and of the ease with which they can be written is an important task of all teacher trainers. Time devoted to discussing those issues can be considered exceedingly well spent.

Notes

This article is based on a paper presented at the 1988 IATEFL Conference in Edinburgh.

1) Although the following comments on pre-service trainees are based on the experience of working with Polish trainees, trainers who work in other parts of the world will probably have experienced similar attitudes.

2) For a group of 18, the slips are in three different colours and are numbered from 1 to 6, each number appearing three times, each time on a different colour.

3) cf Gołębiowska (1987:126-127)

4) The reasons why some trainees co-operate with the 'teacher' while others do not are entirely insignificant here.

5) cf Gołębiowska (1987:73-74)

6) cf Jones (1982:6): 'In simulations generally questions are more important than answers'.

7) The following quotations can be used to warn trainees against overestimating the role and function of role-plays:

> Nowadays, proponents of communicative methods often say or imply that it is not very respectable to get your class to do oral drills, which are condemned as 'meaningless', 'boring', or 'uncommunicative'. Teachers have responded by for example setting oral exercises in which there is an 'information gap' (...). Too often, though, these conscientious teachers set up communicative activities without first helping their pupils to overcome difficulties in pronunciation or giving them any controlled practice, because drills are

> out of favour. To hope that our pupils will learn English simply by being encouraged to communicate is, I suggest, to mistake *ends* for *means*. What is fallacious nowadays is the assumption that the new communicative techniques *displace* the older manipulative ones. Both sorts are needed. Pupils need first the chance to conquer formal difficulties and then the opportunity to exploit semantic possibilities. (Abbott 1981:229)

> In practice (...) games and simulations (...) have a role to play, but it cannot happily be a major role in a long-term language programme. Such techniques are frequently used with great success in short courses for intermediate and advanced adults and adolescents - but these are building on the basic work, however inadequate it may appear to be, of earlier teachers in more conventional schools. (Brumfit 1984:82)

8) Trainees might be reminded that the role-cards used in microteaching were proper role-cards, in fact. Since some 'learners' were told not to co-operate, disagreement was built into the microlesson. Information gap was secured by the 'teacher' not knowing how 'learners' would behave and the 'learners' not knowing what (or how) they would be taught.

9) cf Gołębiowska (1987:79-80)

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